

ERAC-SFIC 1353/20

NOTE

From:	SFIC Secretariat
To:	Delegations
Subject:	Summary conclusions of the 44th meeting of the Strategic Forum for International S&T Cooperation (SFIC), held in Brussels on 2 March 2020

The meeting was chaired by Ms Martina Hartl (AT).

All presentations made during the meeting are included in document WK 2438/20.

1. Adoption of the agenda

2. Tour de Table

Presentation of recent INCO developments: the traditional tour de table took place.

Contributions by delegations will also be circulated to the committee in a dedicated SFIC bi-weekly.

In its contribution, the Commission gave a state of play on upcoming INCO events. The Union for the Mediterranean Regional Platform on Research and Innovation is expected to hold its next meeting in Barcelona on 6 April 2020. Building on the adopted conclusions of the last meeting on 25 November 2019, the objective of the meeting, which will be co-chaired by Director Cristina Russo and the new Secretary-General Higher Council for S&T Jordan, is to have more tailored and strategic discussions on the future thematic priorities for the Platform. The Commission indicated that for the meeting to be successful, it would be important for the Member States to nominate one senior representative from the Ministry of Scientific Research and Innovation (or the equivalent thereof).

The 15th EU-Canada Joint Science & Technology Cooperation Committee meeting was scheduled to take place in Brussels on 11 March 2020 (postponed since due to travel restrictions and coronavirus). Director Cristina Russo will co-chair the meeting with Mr. Emmanuel Kamarianakis, Director General of Investment, Innovation and Education, Global Affairs Canada. Possible new areas of mutual interest for future cooperation include the Green Deal and climate change, the Digital Agenda and AI, Advanced Manufacturing and Aerospace, Health, life sciences and smart cities, Agriculture and Bioeconomy, Healthy oceans and seas, Innovation dimension of Horizon Europe, Eureka/Eurostars, and Cluster-to-cluster collaboration. Members of the Research Working Party and the Chair and Vice-Chair of SFIC will have the possibility to attend the meeting as observers.

The 15th EU-India Summit is expected to take place in Brussels on 13 March 2020. During this summit, the “EU-India Strategic Partnership: A Roadmap to 2025” will be endorsed as a common roadmap to guide joint action and further strengthen the EU-India Strategic Partnership over the next five years. R&I constitutes a significant part of this roadmap, with various actions and initiatives foreseen, such as strengthening cooperation in R&I under Horizon Europe in a number of areas in order to contribute to the sustainable modernisation of India and to jointly tackle identified challenges and increase mutual access to market for technologies; identifying areas of cooperation in Horizon Europe with an identical emphasis in the fields of science and social sciences; and further strengthening mobility actions of researchers and academia.

The Commission also mentioned that it tabled the proposal for the renewal of the S&T Agreement between EU and India for a period of 5 years. The same goes for the Agreement with Ukraine.

As far as the EU-China Summit is concerned, the Commission indicated that the preparations were still ongoing but that the summit might possibly be postponed due to concerns about the coronavirus. For the same reason, the Joint S&T Cooperation Committee meeting with South Korea planned for 9 March was postponed.

The SFIC Chair inquired about the link between the strategic roadmaps like the one between the EU and India and the R&I roadmaps. The Commission explained that the strategic roadmaps are more general and cover also other topics than R&I, whereas the R&I roadmaps are part of the Commission's international R&I cooperation strategy and will be evaluated in the framework of the upcoming new strategy.

3. Strategic development of SFIC

The SFIC Chair presented her views on the strategic development of SFIC. The environment in which SFIC is working is changing, with the upcoming discussions on the new European Research Area (ERA) and the review of the ERA advisory structure, the Green Deal and missions and partnerships as elements in this change. The Chair considered that it would be important to take into account the needs of the Member States, to reflect more on joint actions and/or joint approaches and on how to involve the International Service Facility in the work SFIC is doing. This could be done for example with more structured bi-weekly information, by continuing with the back-to-back workshops and by encouraging participation and reporting of SFIC members in events related to international STI cooperation.

Relating to SFIC's contribution to the development of the ERA, the Chair mentioned the national “Tour de Capitals” events organized by the Commission related to the renewed ERA and the input from SFIC to the discussions on the relevance of the international dimension and of international cooperation for the future ERA. She also referred to the contribution from SFIC to the monitoring of the ERA Priority 6.

As regards networking and communication, the Chair mentioned the idea to invite science counsellors of 3rd countries to SFIC meetings and her plan to take further steps towards social media presence (Twitter). She invited delegations to volunteer to help her with the latter.

During the discussion that followed, delegations reminded that the reason why SFIC was established was the fragmentation of international collaboration in the Framework Programmes for R&I. There is no programme committee dedicated to this ERA Priority, and the strategic programming committee seldom has time to tackle this aspect. They agreed that a new SFIC strategic workshop would be useful after the Commission tables its Communication on the renewed ERA. The usefulness of the “Tour de Capitals” events was also mentioned, as was the potential role of SFIC vis-à-vis international innovation collaboration.

The DE delegation volunteered to help the Chair with social media presence.

4. Election of the SFIC Vice-Chair

The term of the current SFIC Vice-Chair ends on 7 March 2020. The procedure for the election of the new Vice-Chair had therefore been launched by the SFIC Secretariat on 20 December 2020, with 31 January 2020 as the deadline for the candidates. By this deadline, one candidature had been received from the current Vice-Chair, Tiina Vihma-Purovaara (FI).

Ms Vihma-Purovaara presented her motivation to continue in the position of the SFIC Vice-Chair and was consequently elected unanimously. The Chair and the SFIC delegations thanked Ms Vihma-Purovaara for her commitment.

5. SFIC activities in the context of the ERA

The SFIC Chair reported back from the ERAC Steering Board meeting that had taken place on 11 February 2020. She indicated that there would be a discussion at the next ERAC plenary on 30-31 March 2020 on the links between the European Higher Education Area and the ERA. She would report back to SFIC from that discussion, and SFIC should also reflect on its role in this aspect. She also mentioned that the monitoring of the National ERA Action Plans relating to Priority 1 was on-going at ERAC level and that a preliminary report on this would be presented in June. Moreover, the ERAC Annual Report exercise for 2019 has been launched and the ERA-related groups had been invited to provide their contributions to the Report by the end of March. The Chair indicated that in the coming days, the draft SFIC Annual Report 2019 that will also serve as SFIC's contribution to the ERAC Annual Report would be sent to SFIC delegations for their eventual comments.

The Chair also mentioned the presentation that had been given on the European Semester and the monitoring of the sustainable development goals. Furthermore, she had taken note of the strong Presidency Trio approach at ERAC level.

Delegations considered that it indeed was necessary to have a reflection at SFIC on its role relating to the links between the European Higher Education Area and the ERA.

6. Debriefing from the Council Policy debate on International R&I Cooperation and reflection on the impact on an eventual SFIC Paper/Opinion

Ms Nada Sirotić, the Chair of the Working Party on Research, reported back from the Council (Competitiveness) meeting of 28 February during which a policy debate on international R&I cooperation had taken place.

Ms Sirotić indicated that the policy debate had shown the complexity of the topic and also that the discussion was timely. Ministers had acknowledged the added value of international R&I cooperation but mentioned issues such as IPR, data protection and reciprocity, as well as science diplomacy as a means to strengthen relationships with third countries. It was clear that more work is needed at technical level, especially on sector-specific issues.

During the discussion that followed, delegations indicated that a balanced approach is necessary, especially as regards openness vs. protection of strategic EU interests. They urged the Commission to take this into account in the revision of its 2012 strategy on international R&I cooperation and indicated that SFIC should contribute either on the draft strategy or once it is published. The Commission considered that it would be more impactful for SFIC to contribute to the draft strategy. After all, the Commission was still discussing how and whether the strategy would be part of the ERA Communication.

7. OECD presentation of current international issues

Mr Mario Cervantes, senior economist in the OECD Committee for Scientific and Technological Policy, Directorate for Science, Technology and Innovation, gave a presentation on "International cooperation in S&T at the cross roads". He mentioned, *inter alia*, that the revision of two OECD instruments was on-going: the 1988 OECD Recommendation concerning general framework of principles on international cooperation in S&T and the 1995 OECD Recommendation on the Principles for facilitating international technology cooperation between businesses. Relating to the 1988 Recommendation, new issues like sustainable development, open access and open data have been identified. An open consultation will be launched in April 2020. As to the 1995 Recommendation, it is still relevant and valid, but there is a need for new provisions due to the new policy context. An open consultation should take place by January 2021. Participation of SFIC in the open consultations would be important.

Delegations considered that stronger links between SFIC and the OECD would be essential, as the OECD has a key role in discussing the general framework of international R&I cooperation and in tackling societal challenges. They mentioned the STIP Compass and the possibility to contribute to OECD case studies, and considered it indeed important for SFIC to participate in the open consultations.

The SFIC Chair flagged the possibility for SFIC delegates participating also in OECD work to report on this at SFIC plenaries (for example under a standing information item under AOB) or for information about OECD activities to be included in the SFIC bi-weekly emails. It was agreed that the SFIC Chair and Vice-Chair would write up ideas on how to continue the work and exchange with the OECD.

8. Information on the Mutual Learning Exercise

The FR delegation made a presentation on the state of play of the MLE. The dissemination workshop, which will be open to all SFIC Members will take place on 26 May 2020 (back-to-back with the SFIC plenary on 27 May). The final report of the MLE, that will contain 13 recommendations mainly for national policy-making, will be launched at that event. The report of the SFIC Benchmarking Working Group on the Benchmarking exercise on strategies and roadmaps for international cooperation in R&I will also be presented during the event.

9. Information by the Swedish delegation on the coordination mechanisms for EU R&I (EU-Sam), as well as a ‘coordination function’ for bilateral cooperation (Int-Sam)

The Swedish delegation presented "INTSAM", the Swedish mechanism for collaboration between five Swedish R&I funding agencies, Vinnova, the Swedish Research Council, Formas, Forte and the Swedish Energy Agency. The aim is to streamline, strengthen and pool the funding agencies' international efforts. INTSAM consists of a Steering group and seven working groups focusing on the geographical areas of Africa, Brazil, China, India, Japan and North America as well as multilateral areas. Its budget is SEK 25M per year.

To reply to questions from SFIC delegations and Chair, the Swedish delegation explained that the added value of the mechanism is the possibility for the funding agencies from third countries to collaborate either with the whole group of five agencies or with one or a couple of the five agencies. The working groups propose activities to the steering group. In the joint calls, one agency is responsible for the administration. Apart from joint calls, the agencies also organize workshops together. The funding for the mechanism comes from the Ministries, and sometimes representatives of certain Ministries are invited to the meetings of the steering group. Regarding the geographical areas, the steering group decides on them based partly on Ministry priorities and also based on the amount of collaboration already existing on a certain area.

10. Working Groups and Task Forces

a) Science Diplomacy

The Spanish delegation presented the draft Input paper on behalf of the Science Diplomacy Task Force. To provide a comprehensive, yet structured overview of measures perceived as relevant for the further development and implementation of Science Diplomacy related activities within the EU Framework Programmes and the European Research Area, the Task Force grouped the recommended key activities according to the time frame (short-, medium- and long-term), the recommended action and the area of activity. According to the Task Force, supporting training activities on science diplomacy and on scientific advice is crucial, and more communication is needed between policy makers and scientists. The Task Force also recommends actions for all 3 Horizon Europe pillars. The recommended actions are not for SFIC to implement but for the Commission and the Member States, and thus once adopted, the Input paper would be distributed to all relevant stakeholders in the Commission and the Member States (including MS representatives in the strategic programming committee). It could also serve as input for the Commission Communications on the Strategy on International R&I Cooperation and on the renewed ERA.

The Commission indicated that it had organised a seminar on 16 January 2020 on Science Diplomacy and that Commissioner Gabriel attaches great importance to Science Diplomacy. Sessions on Science Diplomacy are expected to be organised during the R&I Days in September 2020. The discussions on the first Work programme under Horizon Europe have started, and therefore it would be useful to circulate the paper to the Member States' representatives in the shadow strategic programming committee. Science Diplomacy is included in the current Strategy on International R&I Cooperation and will certainly also be included in the new one.

The input paper on Science Diplomacy was adopted unanimously by SFIC. Next steps for the Task Force will be presented at next SFIC plenary.

b) Africa

The Spanish delegation presented the draft Strategic Report on behalf of the SFIC Africa Task Force. The Task Force had been able to use the data gathered by the SFIC Benchmarking Working Group on strategies and roadmaps for international cooperation in R&I. The Task Force makes recommendations in terms of both instruments and themes for collaboration. Furthermore, the Task Force makes three recommendations for immediate action.

During the discussion that followed, delegations praised the work done by the Africa Task Force. Some delegations wished to see more concrete ideas relating to the platform that the Task Force recommends to be established for encouraging European countries and the Commission to enhance an ongoing integrative work in the field of collaboration with Africa in research, innovation and higher education policy. Some were also wondering why the EIT KICs had been mentioned as a good example for instruments that enable the knowledge triangle. The Spanish delegation indicated that Member States would need to engage more intensively in the preparation of the high-level policy dialogue with Africa. Regarding the EIT KICs, the Spanish delegation referred to the Strategic Innovation Agenda of the EIT (on which a partial general approach was adopted by the Competitiveness Council on 28 February 2020) that indicates that the KICs should play a role in international R&I cooperation.

The Commission informed that its Africa strategy would be published in the next couple of days (was adopted on 9 March) and that two Commission Directorates-General, DG RTD and DG DEVCO, are putting in place a working-group on R&D cooperation for development. There is also the recently launched EU-Africa Innovation partnership. The Commission confirmed that knowledge triangle is indeed very important in terms of the R&I cooperation with Africa. As to the high-level policy dialogue with Africa, the Member States are full members of this dialogue, and the Commission was wondering what more should be done. It reminded delegations that Africa should be seen as an opportunity, not as a problem, and that interaction with the Member States is essential in the EU-Africa R&I cooperation.

The Spanish delegation then gave an update on the Workshop that would take place the day after the SFIC plenary, 3 March 2020. 55 participants had confirmed, among others speakers from African countries and research organisations in Africa. The idea was to discuss the policy options and to listen to the contributions from all stakeholders. Following the workshop, a new version of the draft Strategic report would be prepared, and this will be circulated to SFIC delegations for comments.

The Africa Task Force will continue its work until next SFIC plenary on 27 May 2020 and then present a report of the workshop and the final Strategic report for adoption by SFIC. It will also present a SFIC opinion for adoption at the SFIC plenary in May.

c) China

The Commission gave an update on the follow-up to the China meetings that took place on 18 December 2019 and 28 February 2020. Following the meeting in December, a concept note for a draft set of guidelines on foreign interference in higher education institutions and research organisations had been prepared by the Commission and will now be further developed in co-creation with the Member States, research organisations and higher education institutions. The Member States and the stakeholders have the opportunity to send comments until the end of March, following which a new meeting at Directors-General level will be organised by the Commission.

The SFIC Chair recalled that the Member States had asked for a real co-creation process on the guidelines and that for some Member States the nature of the guidelines was not clear. Furthermore, some Member States representatives were hesitating whether they could endorse the guidelines concerning e.g. research organisations.

The Commission explained that it was reflecting on the legal nature of the guidelines, but that the most important reason was to raise the visibility on cases of foreign interference and have a discussion with the Member States. The idea was still to produce a set of guidelines that are country-agnostic. Furthermore, it would be important to work on enhancing knowledge on China and the Chinese R&I environment in the EU. The Commission would like to know what actions are being put in place at Member States' level and asked whether the SFIC China Task Force could compile such information.

A discussion followed on the type of information that the SFIC Task Force could gather. The conclusion was that the SFIC Chair and Vice-Chair would collect ideas on what kind of information relating to China to collect from the Member States and would then consult on this with the Commission.

d) Establishment of an innovation-related Task Force

The SFIC Chair presented some ideas related to the establishment of a SFIC Task Force on innovation aspects in international cooperation. The Austrian, Belgian, Estonian, Finnish, French, German, Hungarian, Maltese and Spanish delegations indicated that they would be interested in participating in such a Task Force. No delegation however volunteered to coordinate an input paper for the SFIC May plenary. Following the discussion, the SFIC Chair concluded that those delegations who had indicated their willingness to contribute to the work of a potential innovation-related Task Force should send their initial ideas about the topics and coverage of such a Task Force to the SFIC Secretariat by 16 March. The Secretariat would collect and compile those ideas for further discussion at the May SFIC plenary.

11. Any other business

The SFIC Chair inquired whether delegations would have information about the effects of the coronavirus on international R&I cooperation. The Maltese delegation indicated that in Malta, a project launched in 2019 had not yet started because of the virus. The Finnish science counsellor from Beijing returned back to Finland. Furthermore, Finnish SMEs were having problems obtaining material from China and were therefore experiencing problems with financing. In Belgium a joint committee meeting had been postponed and the launch of a call delayed. In Switzerland, events with more than 1000 participants had to be cancelled. A webinar “Café des Sciences: Scientific View on COVID-19” had been organized with the participation of two renown Swiss epidemiologists. The Commission indicated that it had internal instructions for limiting travel from and to the affected countries and regions. Moreover, events organized with the International R&I Collaboration service facility had been cancelled. The Commission had launched an urgent call for research that will improve clinical care of patients infected with the virus, as well as the overall public health response and had received 90 proposals.